

## A Stone of Stumbling

Scripture Text: Romans 9:30-33

### Introduction

Have you ever stumbled over something? Have you ever stumbled over something that was in plain sight? We would probably not want to admit it, but sometimes we stumble or trip over something that was really in plain view. Maybe we were not paying attention. Maybe something else caught our eye. Other times, what causes us to stumble is less obvious and we walk right up to it not realizing it is there. A stone that causes stumbling is like the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some hear the Gospel and refuse to believe it. They either do not really know who Jesus is or they do not really know who they are. In order to accept Christ as Savior, you need to understand your own need to be saved. If you think everything is OK or you can do it by yourself, why do you need Christ?

The situation Paul was writing in this passage is the same one he mentioned throughout chapter nine. Some Jews were being saved, but many were not. In addition, many Gentiles (those who were not Jewish) were being saved. The main issue Paul has been dealing with since the beginning of this chapter was that only some Jews were called to salvation. Many of them were accursed and cut off from Christ. Israel had stumbled. There was only a remnant of Paul's people who were being saved. This caused Paul to lament over his fellow Jewish people. He wrote that he would be willing to cut himself off from Christ if it meant that the Israelites would be saved. Of course, this was not possible. Only One person has the power to save and it was not Paul.

### Two Reasons for Salvation

Why were so few Jews believing in Jesus Christ? There are at least two reasons anyone gets saved, and they are not contradictory. You might be thinking right now that there is only one reason one gets saved. Paul's first answer in this chapter was that God has chosen some in Israel to be saved, but not all. God was not obliged to save every Israelite for Scripture says, "It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring." (Romans 9:8) God decides who are His and who are not. God has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (Romans 9:18) However, we see throughout Scripture that God's sovereignty is somehow linked with human responsibility. Israel should have believed the Gospel and should have trusted in Christ, but many refused to do so.

There is another reason why a person gets saved, namely, that a person "attains righteousness." God is holy and perfect and just. He hates sin. His righteousness cannot co-exist with man's unrighteousness. The only people who stand before God without being destroyed are perfectly righteous people. That is the problem! There are not any perfectly righteous people (except One). Remember what Paul wrote earlier in Romans 3:9-10: "Both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one.'" So God's sovereign call is not enough to save anybody. Elect sinners are still sinners and not acceptable. They must "attain righteousness."

Unfortunately, this is not likely to be done. That is why God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. So we need God's calling and God's righteousness in order to be saved.

### **The Wrong Pursuit Leads to Failure**

The situation with the people of Paul's day, as well as those today, is that they pursued righteousness the wrong way. If you pursue something the wrong way, you will end up with the wrong result. We see this in verses thirty and thirty-one.

***Romans 9:30–31*** <sup>30</sup> *What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; <sup>31</sup> but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.*

Paul asked the question about getting righteousness because the burning question on some minds was how could God save Gentiles but not save His own chosen people, the Israelites. Paul's answer here is that they *pursued* the wrong thing. To pursue something implies running after it or working toward getting something. It also implies you are relying on your own ability to attain that something. If you pursue a degree in college, you are working toward that recognition in some area of study. If you pursue a job opportunity, it means you are working toward getting that position. If you pursue a relationship with someone, you are striving for the affection of another person. In each of these examples, the focus is on you working to get the thing you desire.

What is it like to pursue something and not get the thing you pursued? You work so hard to get something only to end in failure. You ran a race only to be denied the prize you sought to have. That would be discouraging. This might be somewhat how the Jewish people felt in Paul's day. Israel pursued the Law of God in an effort to be righteous. They believed that following all of the demands of God's Law written in the Old Testament would make them righteous. The problem with that though, is that no person, except One, could fulfill the demands of the Law. This does not mean that the Law of God was bad, but that no one could fulfill its requirements. The Law of God reveals sin and points people to their need for a Savior. Israel had failed to achieve righteousness.

On the other hand, Paul mentioned in this passage that the Gentiles, those who were not born Jewish, did not pursue righteousness through the Law of God, and yet, they attained it. They attained righteousness where Israel did not. This might have seemed crazy to the Jewish people. This might seem like the college student not studying and the college still awarding that student a college degree. It would be like not working toward a certain goal and yet receiving the very thing you did not work to receive. That may not seem fair. Gentiles, who were not God's chosen people and did not seek right standing with God, now enjoy that right standing. Israel, on the other hand, pursued a right standing with God through the Law but failed to achieve it. Why?

***Romans 9:32*** <sup>32</sup> *Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,*

Both Jews and Gentiles were trying to attain righteousness. One group got it. The other did not. Why? Gentiles attained righteousness by faith, not works. If we try to work towards being saved or being righteous, we will fail. Only when we put aside our futile attempts to be right within ourselves, and trust in the One who is righteous, will we have a right standing with God. Israel did not pursue obedience to the Law by humbly trusting God, but tried to make it a means of establishing their own righteousness, which led them to stumble. Why? Those attempting to establish their own righteousness will see no need for a Savior. There are two ways of *trying* to attain righteousness: the way of works and the way of faith. One leads to death and destruction; the other leads to righteousness and eternal life. Which way are you pursuing?

### **The Stumbling Stone Which Saves**

The last part of verse thirty-two said that the Jewish people “stumbled over the stumbling stone.” The New Living Translation said the Jewish people “stumbled over the great rock in their path.” This was not some pebble in the road. This was not some inconspicuous object hindering their walk. It was also something they should have known. God had warned them about the “great cornerstone” in the Old Testament. For some, He was not what they expected. He was not what they wanted. What is it like to receive a gift you do not want? It might be an ugly sweater, or a tie you will never wear, or something three sizes too small. Sometimes we attempt to put on a good face, to show fake gratitude while at the same time thinking about who we can re-gift this thing. We treat God the same way. He gave the world a great gift, His very own Son, and many reject Him. Many spurn the name of Christ. Look at verse thirty-three.

***Romans 9:33*** <sup>33</sup> as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

In this passage, Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah. God had told Isaiah that He was the One the Israelites should fear. God was both a sanctuary to those who fear Him and a stone of stumbling to those who do not fear Him. Isaiah’s prophecy was not for just the Israelites of His time but also for God’s people today. In that prophecy, Isaiah mentioned “Immanuel,” which means “God is with us.” God would be with His people. He would also be a sanctuary for them, but He would also be a snare to those who do not fear Him. By disregarding God, Israel found Him to be an obstacle they could not evade. They stumbled over Him.

Israel’s stumbling was not a failure to obey the Law of God but a failure to trust in the Savior’s righteousness. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ for righteousness will not be put to shame. Paul repeats this in the very next chapter of Romans when he wrote that we are to believe on Christ for righteousness. When we trust in anything other than Jesus Christ for our righteousness, we stumble over the great stone in our path. Jesus is that stone. God requires nothing less than righteousness, but the only way we can have it is to surrender our pursuit for it and fully trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Christ is a stone of stumbling but also the chief cornerstone of our faith. Jesus said as much when He quoted Psalm 118 regarding Himself.

**Matthew 21:42** <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”

Scripture prophesied this. Jesus confirmed it. Paul repeated it. Jesus is the stone of stumbling. He is the cornerstone. We can either fall upon Him in faith or stumble over Him and be crushed. Those who reject Christ are cut off from Him. But those who reject their ability to attain righteousness through their own efforts, and instead trust in Christ for righteousness, will receive grace and eternal life. As before, we see the intersection of God’s work and man’s responsibility. This stone, Jesus Christ, was rejected by the very people He came to save. They rejected Him. They did not receive the gift God gave to the world. Yet, “This was the Lord’s doing.” To some, Jesus was a stumbling stone. They tripped over Him. To others, He became their righteousness. He became the very means by which God saved them. Which is He to you?

## **Conclusion**

In closing, are you stumbling over Jesus Christ? Are you trying to attain righteousness by yourself, trying to make it on your own? Are you the type of person who believes you have it all figured out? Or are you the person who has a token faith in Christ. You say you believe in Him, but you really have not trusted in Him for righteousness. You go on each day not caring how you really behave or what fruit you produce. God is not mocked. He is not looking for a simple prayer that someone taught you to say. God does not want part of you. God wants a whole hearted commitment to Him and trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. Nothing else will do.

It is the Christmas season and we are busy preparing for time with family. We are hunting down the perfect gifts for friends and family. We are busy coordinating schedules. We say to people that Jesus is the reason for the season but we go on with the business of the holidays with little thought about the gift God has given us. Christ has become a stumbling stone to many because they do not pursue Him, but rather they pursue a false image of Him or they pursue only a piece of Him that fits within their sinful lives. What do you need to give up in your life in order to pursue Christ whole heartedly? What is hindering your relationship with God? Pursue Christ. Attain His righteousness and live. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!